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misfortune to those whom he compliments. The extent of his power is measured by how soon after the compliment his victim suffers, and how serious is the calamity. Most feared of recent witches is a man who as a youth caused a newly arrived curate on his first walk of the island to fall and break his leg; within seconds after the boy praised the vigorous stride of the priest, "the poor creature disappeared behind a fence, feet over head." The folk seldom compliment one another, and when they do they append "God bless you." to the statement as a precautionary incantation. Persons with the evil eye neglect to do this, it is said. I often have wondered—when in a mood to credit the existence of fairies which turn on water faucets in the dead of night—if a series of misfortunes which befell me during 1960 and 1961 was somehow linked to one of these persons wishing me a good year, without uttering "God bless you.", as my wife and I put off the strand in a canoe at the end of our research. The same incantation is voiced by those in the vicinity of one who sneezes—in this case to prevent his soul from being captured by the fairies. It is tempting to attribute the unwillingness of Irish peasants generally to pay compliments to the age-old but now forgotten dread of being accused of the evil eye and of inviting fairies and hag witches to substitute changelings for human children.

Priests of the church at least a century ago rid Inis Beag of most religious practitioners of pagan disposition, but there is evidence that before their acculturative influence was felt diviners and workers of good and evil magic practiced techniques which had their roots in the Iron Age. Divining now is restricted mostly to the seeking of omens by everyone, and the astrological and tea leaf reading skills of several persons who do not charge for their services. The principal workers of magic in the past were herbalists, animal doctors, and bone setters; an animal doctor in Inis Beag and a bone setter in a nearby island still ply their inherited specialties for pay, but both men claim that they are practical folk physicians and do not command pagan or Christian spiritual powers. Just as the islanders share a common body of omens which are used to avoid the misfortunes and compound the benefits in store for them, they also share a common knowledge of folk medicines, which some believe to be more efficacious than the medicines provided by doctor and nurse. Indigenous medicines once were prescribed by workers of magic, misnamed "herb witches"—old women who gathered plants at dawn and "brewed" them in a variety of ways to affect various cures. The dew on the plants, as well as the manner in which they were compounded, gave these medicines a magical potency. To meet such a witch as she was returning from collecting ingredients meant that one was doomed to take on the affliction of the patient being treated by the hag. A similar belief, well represented in the folklore of the islanders, is the transference of disease from a human being to an animal that he has befriended earlier.

Christian and Pagan Reinterpretations

The four quarterly festivals of the Celts were: Imbolc, celebrated on February 1st, Beltaine on May 1st, Lughnasa on August 1st, and Samhain on November 1st.